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Different Cities, Shared Stories: A Five Country Study Challenging Assumptions around Muslim Women and CVE interventions

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Abstract

In recent years a number of programmes to counter violent extremism have specifically included women participants, regarded as an 'untapped resource' and keystone of community engagement. In 2015 this approach was enshrined in UNSCR 2242, which advocates deliberate outreach to women when devising counter-terrorism projects. It is based on assumptions of the need to empower women, as well as their particular ability to exert benign influence over young people, and stop radicalisation to violence. The approach has been particularly prevalent in western CVE projects aimed at preventing home-grown Islamist radicalisation. Based on focus group interviews with Muslim communities in five countries – Canada, the UK, Germany, France and the Netherlands – this article challenges the underlying assumptions of such an approach. It suggests aspects of women's CVE projects may exacerbate existing community tensions, and do not reflect the changing norms of Muslim communities in the West. The article does not propose abandoning women-centric CVE, but promotes alternative modes of engagement to improve its efficacy, and enable it to better appeal to those it is intended to help.

1 Introduction

For some years there has been a long-standing commitment to incorporating 'gender' at the highest institutional levels of international counter-terrorism.[1] The latest such guidance is the 2015 UNSCR resolution 2242, which calls for the

[1] For example, *United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325*, 2000, http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N00/720/18/PDF/N0072018.pdf?OpenElement. "UNSCR 2242 & the Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism," *GIWPS Blog*, November 18, 2015, http://blog.giwps.georgetown.edu/unscr-2242-the-role-of-women-in-countering-violent-extremism/.

inclusion of women in devising programmes to Counter Violent Extremism (CVE).[2] CVE projects, in contrast to counter-terrorism, constitute a preventative and non-coercive 'soft' approach, designed to work in partnership with communities.[3] There has been a proliferation of such projects since the attacks of 9/11, and more recently, the rise of the Islamist terror group Daesh. Yet globally, CVE demonstrates a lack of coherent strategy, with violent extremism (VE) defined differently by different countries. Additionally, CVE programming has been criticised for being both over-reliant on assumptions, and under-conceptualised.[4] The impact of CVE is notoriously difficult to measure, and there is mixed evidence for the efficacy of gendered CVE.[5] Such CVE frequently engages simply with issues of 'women'; sometimes also with a broader understanding of 'gender', as a social construction, dictating expectations of particular behaviours and attributes with men, and others with women.[6]

In Western countries CVE programmes are aimed primarily at two perceived security threats: the extreme-right and Islamist extremism. "Islamist" is a sensitive and often misused term. It broadly refers to a vision in which the political and social order runs in accordance with Islamic law. The terms "Islamism" and "Islamist" in and of themselves do not denote violence.[7] Countries differ in approach, some aim at preventing violent Islamist extremism, others address non-violent extremism too.[8] The primary such violent threat is currently Daesh, an

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[2] "UNSCR 2242 & the Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism."

[3] James Khalil and Martine Zeuthen, *Countering Violent Extremism and Risk Reduction: A Guide to Programme Design and Evaluation*, Whitehall Report, RUSI, 2016. Peter Romaniuk, 'Does CVE Work? Lessons Learnt from the Global Effort to Counter Violent Extremism', Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2015, pp. 7–9.

[4] Stephen Heydemann, "'State of the Art: Countering Violent Extremism as a Field of Practice''," **Insights (United States Institute for Peace, Insights (, Spring 2014), 1, https://www.usip.org/sites/default/files/Insights-Spring-2014.pdf; J. M. Berger, "Making CVE Work: A Focused Approach Based on Process Disruption." (The Hague: International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, The Hague, May 2016), 4, http://icct.nl/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/J.-M.-Berger-Making-CVE-Work-A-Focused-Approach-Based-on-Process-Disruption-.pdf.**

[5] Naureen Chowdhury Fink, Sara Zeiger, and Rafia Bhulai, "A Man's World - Introduction" (Abu Dhabi: Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016, 2016), 11, http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/a-man-s-world.pdf.

[6] OSCE, "Women and Terrorist Radicalization" (OSCE, 2011), http://polis.osce.org/library/f/4061/3772/OSCE-AUT-RPT-4061-EN-3772; Laura Sjoberg, *Gendering Global Conflict: Toward a Feminist Theory of War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 5.

[7] This report adopts the definition used by Gulain Denoeux and Lynn Carter in Guide to the Drivers of Violent Extremism (Washington, DC: USAID, 2009),

[8] Lorenzo Vidino and James Brandon, "Countering Radicalization in Europe," *ICSR (International Centre for the Study of Radicalisation and Political Violence)*, 2012.

Islamist insurgency whose leader has announced a Caliphate in Iraq and Syria, with provinces extending from Africa to Asia.[9] Daesh has both attacked and recruited westerners, with an estimated 5,000 plus European, Canadian and American emigrants joining as fighters and with supporters from Asia, North Africa and beyond.[10] In 2014 around 18% of European Union-origin Daesh supporters travelling to Iraq and Syria were women.[11] Many are converts, as many as 25% of all female recruits in France, and 35% in Germany.[12] Converts are generally overrepresented in Western terrorist activity for Jihadi groups, and in Europe conversion rates are increasing.[13] As with male recruits, most are under 30, and many are minors. The reasons for their migration (or *Hijrah*) to Syria/Iraq are complex and diverse, including: perceived discrimination, desire to raise children in a Caliphate, romantic relationships, or desire for adventure shared with friends.[14] Often characterised in the media as 'Jihadi Brides', women are key in Daesh ideology as wives, mothers, propagandists.[15]

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[9] Aymenn Jawad al-Tamimi, "The Dawn of the Islamic State of Iraq and Ash-Sham," *Current Trends in Islamist Ideology* 16 (March 2014), http://www.hudson.org/content/researchattachments/attachment/1389/tamimi.pdf.

[10] "FOREIGN FIGHTERS An Updated Assessment of the Flow of Foreign Fighters into Syria and Iraq" (The Soufan Group, December 2015), http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/TSG_ForeignFightersUpdate3.pdf.

[11] Carolyn Hoyle, Alexandra Bradford, and Ross Frenett, "Becoming Mulan? Female Western Migrants to ISIS" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, 2015), http://www.strategicdialogue.org/ISDJ2969_Becoming_Mulan_01.15_WEB.PDF; Richard Barrett, "Foreign Fighters in Syria" (New York: The Soufan Group, February 2014), 16, http://soufangroup.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/TSG-Foreign-Fighters-in-Syria.pdf.

[12] Farhad Khosrokhavar, "Converts, Women, Middle-Class — European Jihadism Expands Its Reach," *Worldcrunch.com*, March 2016, http://www.worldcrunch.com/terror-in-europe/converts-women-middle-class-european-jihadism-expands-its-reach/c23s20883/; GUIDO W. STEINBERG, *German Jihad: On the Internationalization of Islamist Terrorism* (Columbia University Press, 2013), http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/stei15992.

[13] Bart Schuurman, Scott Flower, and Peter Grol, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism:" (The Netherlands: ICCT, 2016), 15, http://s3.amazonaws.com/academia.edu.documents/46562548/ICCT-Schuurman-Grol-Flower-Converts-June-2016.pdf?AWSAccessKeyId=AKIAJ56TQJRTWSMTNPEA&Expires=1472053182&Signature=RQu3M6mRk%2FuFhJ7JPHqiIND9%2BwU%3D&response-content-disposition=inline%3B%20filename%3DConverts_and_Islamist_Terrorism_An_Intro.pdf; Milena Uhlmann, "European Converts to Terrorism," *Middle East Quarterly*, June 1, 2008, http://www.meforum.org/1927/european-converts-to-terrorism.

[14] Erin Marie Saltman and Melanie Smith, "'Till Martyrdom Do Us Part' Gender and the ISIS Phenomenon" (Institute for Strategic Dialogue, May 2015), http://www.strategicdialogue.org/publications/; Anita Peresin and Alberto Cervone, "The Western Muhajirat of ISIS," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 0, no. 0 (April 7, 2015): 1–15, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2015.1025611; Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1 (January 2, 2015): 1–22, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.974948.

[15] Charlie Bayliss, "Islamic State Unveils First EVER Spokeswoman in Bid to Brainwash Girls to Join Death Cult," *Express.co.uk*, August 18, 2016, http://www.express.co.uk/news/world/701265/isis-islamic-state-female-spokeswoman-burka-majestic-daesh-syria-propanda-extremists.

United Nations guidance informs and reflects the increasing global focus on women in CVE programmes opposing Islamism, among many other ideologies.[16] However, the assumptions underlying these programmes have frequently been critiqued.[17] Despite for example much research on the role of women as willing agents of violence in movements including the LTTE (Liberation Tamil Tigers of Eelam), Daesh, or the Kurdish independence group the PKK, among others, it has often been assumed that women within the security context are always peaceful.[18] Such assumptions have informed gendered strategies to counter terrorism and violent extremism, shaping understandings of who constitute the actors in terrorist groups.[19]

This paper is the first of a series that addresses these critiques, and the role of gender dynamics in violent extremism. It is the result of qualitative research in five countries, including more than 250 participants.[20] In this initial article we take an essentialist reading of gender, which focuses on women, and in particular assesses the understudied issue of women in CVE[21] initiatives to counter radicalisation to Daesh. [22] This definition of gender is the least complex, but the one most frequently utilised in 'gendered CVE', which in practice refers to CVE which specifically includes women. Follow-up papers will explore the gender dynamics of radicalisation to Daesh; and how gender operates in relation to extreme right movements. We ask: how wanted are programmes targeting women in the communities they are intended to help? How likely are they to succeed? Despite key differences in government CVE approach, in history, and demographics in the countries researched, we were struck by repetition of the same themes, and

[16] Chowdhury Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai, "A Man's World - Introduction," 3.
[17] B. Carter, B, 'Women and Violent Extremism' GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report, 2013.
[18]Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2011).
[19] "What Is U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 and Why Is It so Critical Today?," *United States Institute of Peace*, 51, accessed November 9, 2014, http://www.usip.org/gender_peacebuilding/about_UNSCR_1325.
[20] This research was funded by the Kanishka Programme, Canada's research fund on violent extremism and how to counter it.
[21] Chowdhury Fink, Zeiger, and Bhulai, "A Man's World - Introduction," 3.
[22] Ibid. ; Subsequent papers will consider the gender dynamics of radicalisation to Daesh, and the gender dynamics of radicalisation to the extreme right, and CVE.

stories. We focus on these shared stories from the five research countries to argue for a reappraisal of some core assumptions at the heart of gendered CVE, particularly as the landscape has been changed by the rise of Daesh.

2 CVE, Women and Gender: Logic and Assumptions

Strategies and recommendations emphasising gender, such as the OSCE's 2015 guide to good practice on women and CVE,[23] have been implemented in numerous ways. International policy makers advocate the inclusion of women in CVE in ever more diverse roles.[24] A 2014 United Nations Panel on women in CVE outlined key themes: the need to create political space for women's engagement; to treat them as leaders; to resist stereotypes of specific roles and identities; and to amass more primary data.[25] The importance of community, family and partners is also acknowledged in de-radicalisation processes, as well as preventative measures.[26]

In Europe, much CVE work has specifically involved women, particularly in Muslim communities, precisely because they are believed to represent a peace-making ally against violence.[27] European CVE models are based on pyramid-type understandings of radicalisation. Violent Extremism is considered the result of a process which sees those in 'vulnerable communities' move progressively toward being part of a 'radical milieu', developing ever more extreme views, possibly culminating in violence.[28]

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[23] "Global Counterterrorism Forum Adopts Good Practices Prepared by the OSCE on Women and Countering Violent Extremism | OSCE," accessed August 7, 2016, http://www.osce.org/secretariat/186226.

[24] Hedayah, "Different-Roles-of-Women-in-Cve-Project-Description.pdf," accessed April 18, 2016, http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/different-roles-of-women-in-cve-project-description.pdf.

[25] "Summary Document and Analysis Women and Countering Violent Extremism United Nations Conference October 27th 2014," 2014, https://giwps.georgetown.edu/sites/giwps/files/Women%20and%20Countering%20Violent%20Extremism.pdf; "The Role of Women in Countering Violent Extremism - Panel Discussion," accessed September 6, 2015, http://webtv.un.org/watch/the-role-of-women-in-countering-violent-extremism-panel-discussion/3862565549001.

[26] E.D. Pressman, E.D, Risk Assessment Decisions for Violent Political Extremism, 2009.

[27] "What Is U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 and Why Is It so Critical Today?," 51.

[28] Peter Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu: The Under-Investigated Relationship Between Terrorists and Sympathetic Communities," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 2, no. 9 (November 19, 2010), http://www.terrorismanalysts.com/pt/index.php/pot/article/view/51; Stefan Malthaner and Peter Waldmann, "The Radical Milieu: Conceptualizing the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism*, September 16, 2014, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2014.962441.

Graph 1: The Pyramid Model of Radicalization

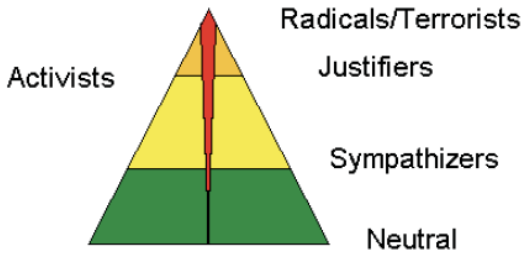

Figure 1: McCauley et al, Pyramid Model[29]

Predominantly, violent actors in extreme movements have been men.[30] Therefore a key CVE assumption has been that women can positively influence violent male actors. Many schemes have also focused on 'mothers', assuming they can better detect the signs of radicalisation in children.[31] Critiques of the approach have identified two key assumptions. Firstly, as applied to radical Islamism, Brown identifies the basis of such programming as a 'maternalist logic': an understanding of Muslim women according to '*their expected gender and racialized role as mothers'.*[32] Secondly, CVE strategies have sought to assert Western understandings of gender equality to Muslim communities, with the aim of empowering women assumed to be oppressed. There is a secondary logic: that failed assimilation of Muslim communities in the West contributes to radicalisation, and that gender equality is an important part of integration processes.[33] The 'failed integration'

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[29] Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalenko, "Mechanisms of Political Radicalization: Pathways Toward Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 20, no. 3 (July 2008): 415–433, doi:10.1080/09546550802073367.

[30] Mia Bloom, *Bombshell: The Many Faces of Women Terrorists* (C Hurst & Co Publishers Ltd, 2011); Edwin Bakker, "Jihadi Terrorists in Europe: Their Characteristics and the Circumstances in Which They Joined the Jihad: An Exploratory Study," Clingendael CSCP Paper (The Hague: Clingendael Institute, 2006), 36, http://www.clingendael.nl/sites/default/files/20061200_cscp_csp_bakker.pdf; Daveed Gartenstein-Ross and Laura Grossman, "Homegrown Terrorists in the US and UK: An Empirical Examination of the Radicalization Process" (Foundation for Defence of Democracies, Washington, DC: FDD CENTER FOR TERRORISM RESEARCH, 2009), 63.

[31] "A Man's World? Exploring the Roles of Women in Counter Terrorism and Violent Extremism" (Hedayah and The Global Center on Cooperative Security, 2016, 2016), 6, http://www.hedayah.ae/pdf/a-man-s-world-1.pdf.

[32] Katherine E Brown, 'Gender and Counter-Radicalization: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures', in *Gender, National Security and Counter-Terrorism*, ed. Jayne Huckerby and Margaret L. Satterthwaite (Abingdon, Oxon ; New York: Routledge, 2013), 41.

[33] Brown, 'Gender and Counter-Radicalization: Women and Emerging Counter-Terror Measures', 42. **Jayne Huckerby, "Women and Preventing Violent Extremism: The U.S. and U.K. Experiences" (NYU School of Law: Center for Human Rights and Global Justice, 2011), http://chrgj.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/10/Women-and-Violent-Extremism-The-US-and-UK-Experiences.pdf.**

explanation of radicalisation is however not proved, and extremists have varied widely in age, socioeconomic status, literacy levels, occupation and past criminal records.[34]

Gendered CVE has appeared in numerous formats, often focused on integration and empowerment. These can include: generic programmes of classes to engage women assumed to lack access to public amenities; police or state-sponsored workshops on radicalisation; community outreach through local organisations; gendered counter-narratives, for example aimed at mothers, offering advice on the signs of radicalisation. In the UK, Muslim women have been an explicit focus of the Prevent counter-radicalisation strategy, which since its public launch in 2006/7 sought to work with 'Muslim women...at the heart of communities' as 'untapped potential'.[35] In practice this saw women invited to a range of activities, from dancing groups, to parenting classes, to workshops on how to spot the signs of radicalisation. The Prevent programme has faced criticism, primarily from Muslim communities themselves. One concern was that it asked Muslim women to spy on their families, an allegation found baseless in a subsequent investigation undertaken when the programme was restructured.[36] Community mistrust of the 'Prevent' brand has led to a recent recommendation from the Home Affairs Select Committee for it to be rebranded 'Engage'.[37]

European Union funding calls also highlight the role of women (and youth) as a "vector of community change for peace."[38] In the Netherlands, well-established CVE programmes have been linked to initiatives aimed at the integration of Muslim

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[34] Anja Dalgaard-Nielsen, "Violent Radicalization in Europe: What We Know and What We Do Not Know," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 33, no. 9 (August 16, 2010): 797–814, doi:10.1080/1057610X.2010.501423.

[35] *Preventing Violent Extremism : Next Steps For Communities*, n.d., 41.

[36] Arun Kundnani, *Spooked* (Institute of Race Relations, 2009), 6, http://www.irr.org.uk/pdf2/spooked.pdf; Shaista Gohir, "Submission from Muslim Women's Network UK for the Inquiry into the Preventing Violent Extremism Programme" (Muslim Women's Network, 2009), 6, http://www.mwnuk.co.uk//go_files/resources/629031-MWNUK%20submission%20for%20PVE%20Inquiry.pdf.

[37] Home Affairs Select Committee, "Radicalisation: The Counter-Narrative and Identifying the Tipping Point" (House of Commons: House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, August 2016), http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201617/cmselect/cmhaff/135/135.pdf.

[38] European Commission, Instrument Contributing to Stability and Peace, Support to in-country civil society actors in conflict prevention, peace-building, crisis preparedness, Peace-building Partnership Annual Action Programme 2014, Guidelines for Grant Applicants, Reference: EUROPAID/136-760/DD/ACT/PK,

women through secularization processes and criticized for seeking to impose a particular kind of equality on women, which many Dutch Muslim women reject.[39]

Meanwhile countries only beginning to develop national CVE programmes to counter Daesh-related radicalisation, such as Canada, are seeking to understand how to specifically incorporate women into their work. In Germany, which has no integrated national CVE strategy, NGOs have worked for years on countering far-right extremism, and more recently Islamism.[40] At the heart of many projects, such as one of the most successful, Hayat, is an engagement with families of radicalized youth, including women and mothers. In France, the government has only recently started to engage in counter-radicalisation, and has specifically aimed messaging at women, through for example the social media hashtag #stopviolentJihadisme, which specifically challenges narratives aimed at women.[41]

3 Methodology

This research sought to answer the question, 'how wanted and needed are CVE programmes targeting women in the communities they are intended to help'? It aimed, as a result, to shed light on their likely chances of success. Opinion was canvassed through 41 anonymous focus groups and a number of individual interviews with more than 217 people, men, women, and youths aged 16 and over, for reasons of consent, in communities in two cities in five countries – the UK, Canada, Germany, France and the Netherlands. Male participants were included due to recognition of the need for their support in gender-based programming.[42] Engagement with women in CVE does not take place in a vacuum; the attitudes of men are key in building successful CVE regimes, or in their failure. Five interviews were also conducted with people with direct experience of radicalisation. Expert interviews to provide context were also carried out.

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[39] Bracke, "Section in Subjects of debate: secular and sexual exceptionalism, and Muslim women in the Netherlands," 2011.

[40] **Peter R. Neumann, *Die neuen Dschihadisten: ISIS, Europa und die nächste Welle des Terrorismus* (Berlin: Econ, 2015), 199–206.**

[41] **"France Launches Shock Video to 'Stop Jihadists' - The Local," accessed August 12, 2015, http://www.thelocal.fr/20150128/france-releases-shock-anti-jihad-video.**

[42] **Sandy Ruxton, *Gender Equality and Men: Learning from Practice* (Oxford : Herdon, VA: Oxfam Professional, 2004).**

The intention of the research was to provide answers to key research questions:

- How wanted are CVE programmes targeting women in the Muslim communities they are intended to help?
- How likely are they to succeed?
- Should CVE specifically target women?
- How should CVE target women?
- What sort of CVE engagement do communities want, if any?
- Who should deliver CVE?
- Is Cumulative Extremism – in which extremism in one movement provokes further extremism in another – an issue?
- How wanted are CVE programmes to deal with issues of extreme-right extremism?[43]

The five countries were chosen due to key differences in CVE approaches addressing the same primary threats. In countering Islamist extremism, for example, the UK government has a well-developed counter-radicalisation strategy which has tended to target Muslim (religious and cultural) communities, understood as the broad base of the radicalisation 'pyramid'. The Netherlands and Canada have taken a similar approach; CVE in France is less well-developed, and in Germany, more focused on families in need. We also approached (geographic) communities of non-Muslim and predominantly white people in locations where there have been issues with the extreme right.[44] A decision was made to focus research on two cities in each country, in order to address the concept of 'cumulative extremism', and any specific relationship between communities in which the far right has support, and Muslim communities seen as 'vulnerable' to radicalisation.

The research intended to explore people's experiences of extremism in relation to the communities that they inhabit. It is an attempt to situate observations

[43] These two questions are beyond the scope of this paper but addressed later in the series
[44] Their contributions will be featured in a future article

grounded in real world experiences. It was therefore anticipated that there might be different knowledge levels in groups. Some had direct experience of radicalisation, others did not. Some had attended CVE interventions in their local community, others knew about CVE through others, or the media. Even where participants had not themselves experienced CVE interventions, their contribution was not purely 'theoretical' – all participants were affected by discourses surrounding extremism and terrorism, now a part of their everyday life, and therefore have valid opinions on what is likely to work (or not). Indeed half of the Muslim focus groups (13 groups) included participants with some experience in their family or community of radicalisation.

In order to ensure uniformity of approach, research training took place in London, with additional training for the lead Québec researcher. The importance of a consistent methodology was stressed, with emphasis on uniform sampling methods, an area frequently critiqued in terrorism studies.[45] All efforts were made to ensure a rigorous methodology, with a clear concept of the purpose of research, group size, inclusion criteria and themes around which questions should be asked.

In order to elicit the most relevant answers, the intention was to engage primarily with those who had no specialist/professional knowledge of radicalisation but might realistically be (or had been) the subject of CVE projects. This broad inclusion criterion was based on the *milieu* model used to understand radicalisation, which suggests that the broad communities from which support emerges are an important foundation to radicalisation. Focus group participants were identified according to stratified sampling, meaning that there were a minimum number of focus groups per agreed key criteria, specifically: gender (male/female), age (young teen-20s, middle aged 30s-40s-50s, old 60s-70s) and religion/ethnicity. Though gatekeepers (for example, mosques, community groups,

[45] A. Silke, "The Devil You Know: Continuing Problems with Research on Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 13, no. 4 (December 1, 2001): 1–14, doi:10.1080/09546550109609697; P. Schmid Alex, "Frameworks for Conceptualising Terrorism," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 16, no. 2 (January 1, 2004): 197–221, doi:10.1080/09546550490483134; Magnus Ranstorp, "Introduction: Mapping Terrorism Research," in *Mapping Terrorism Research: State of the Art, Gaps and Future Direction*, ed. Magnus Ranstorp, 1 edition (London; New York: Routledge, 2007).

women's groups) were primarily used to identify participants, all were selected on their willingness to participate and engage in the subject area.

'Research fatigue', and frustration with continued focus on issues of extremism,[46] led to a difficulty in attracting participants. The aims of the research were therefore clearly explained, along with benefits to participants and protections afforded them. Homogenous focus groups in respect to age, gender and ethnicity/religion were conducted, as far as possible, with six to eight people. It was hoped this would facilitate open conversation. Using semi-structured interview guides with as little researcher intervention as possible, research reflected the participant-led approach and enabled the team to listen to the issues highlighted by the groups, which often bore no relation to questions asked, emphasizing their alternate priorities.

Due to difficulties in assembling groups – often due to participant fatigue – homogeneity was not always possible. Additionally, some communities resisted the need for gender segregation. Therefore, 10% of focus groups were mixed, men and women. Some groups took part with the explicit intention of criticising the concept of CVE, and made this clear from the outset. Not-withstanding these limitations, the intention of canvassing the views of a range of ages, of both genders, and on the subject of how to counter two ideologies was met in all five countries, except the Netherlands where only Muslim community focus groups were conducted.

Additionally, in-depth life history semi-structured interviews were conducted with individuals or families. This included one man supportive of the white supremacist agenda; also, the families of four young people specifically affected by radicalisation. These accounts provide direct information on how young people radicalise.

Field work was undertaken between October 2015 and January 2016 inclusively. Every participant response was then coded and analysed in Atlas Ti. Needless to

[46] Tom Clark, "`We're Over-Researched Here!' Exploring Accounts of Research Fatigue within Qualitative Research Engagements," *Sociology* 42, no. 5 (October 1, 2008): 955–59, doi:10.1177/0038038508094573.

say, our participants express a range of opinions, and none should be read as 'speaking for' any group in its entirety. It should also be noted that a longer period of field-research would have yielded more interviews.

4 Challenging Assumptions

Research participants accepted the inevitability of women's primary role in care-giving in families, and also expressed a broad desire to prevent radicalisation. However, participants across countries voiced a number of strong and shared challenges to the assumptions underlying CVE programming aimed at Muslim women. This section outlines the nature of those challenges, and why they are perceived as an obstacle to successful CVE implementation.

4.1 Community Understanding of Extremism, Radicalisation and CVE

In order to clarify participant understanding of CVE, and the issues of radicalisation, each focus group began with the question, "what do you understand by the terms 'extremism' and 'radicalisation'?". Responses across groups and countries overwhelmingly suggested these terms were now solely associated with Islam, leading to feelings of mistrust and discrimination. Answers to the first question tended to frame the resulting discussion. All groups felt the terms could in theory apply to any type of ideology or belief, but in the current political climate specifically referred to Daesh, and more generally Muslims, who regarded this as unfair and disproportionate:

> *Extremist – mmm – for me, to be honest, for me, I see only one thing… Today it's…a bearded man with a Kalashnikov in his hands.*
> – [Young Muslim Man, France]

> *Objectively I know 'Violent Extremism' could include anyone, but I am aware – through media and conversations – that whenever it comes up – even I*

would pause and hope the word 'Islam' doesn't come after that. I know that this is what is associated with it.
– [Young Muslim woman, Canada]

..look at the groups who are against the arrival of refugees. They set fire to everything, ... Do you hear someone from the media say that they are 'radicalised'? No. But if a Muslim boy does something then he is immediately 'radicalised'.
– [Middle Aged Muslim Man, the Netherlands]

These themes – media bias and societal Islamophobia– tended to dominate focus group discussion, framing understandings of CVE as 'targeting' rather than partnering Muslim communities. Participant preoccupation with this perception often challenged the core research aim of interrogating the concept of women, gender and CVE. Research questions around women's role in CVE were frequently regarded as peripheral issues and in some groups, irrelevant.

4.2 CVE and Muslim Women: Empowerment or Disempowerment?

A key criticism of CVE interventions aimed at Muslim women was that its 'maternalist logic', asking mothers to remain vigilant to the potential radicalisation of their children, disempowered them. Female Muslim participants in all countries suggested this approach failed to challenge existing negative gender relations and entrenched stereotypical ideas of women within Muslim communities. This objection was raised even when participants stressed the importance of motherhood and reported wanting more information on radicalisation. Portrayals of women as 'more caring by nature', and as primary child-care providers, even if accepted as accurate descriptors of family dynamics, were felt by Muslim women to entrench patriarchy when applied to Muslim communities by non-Muslims and by Muslim men. While mothers certainly believe they can influence children, they outlined more public roles for engagement in a variety of professional and leadership roles. In contrast, Muslim men identified 'motherhood' as the only role

for women in CVE. This was actively resisted by many women, who felt such assumptions undermined other efforts to empower them.

'Empowerment' was however regarded as positive *per se*, and desired by female participants, but on their own terms. Muslim participants suggested CVE interventions with a focus on Muslim women, and the ensuing implication that they require specific 'empowerment' did not help them resist 'Islamophobic stereotypes'. All Muslim participants were sensitive to the fact that oppression of Muslim women in Islam is a key theme in Islamophobic discourse, and extreme right-wing recruitment narratives. Muslim focus groups across countries noted right-wing politics portrays Islam as oppressive, the veil and scarf as symbols of that oppression, and Muslim men as a threat to non-Muslim women. They also considered this a perception of the non-Muslim mainstream, a view validated by this research: non-Muslim focus group participants did believe Muslim women had more traditional roles than those in non-Muslim cultures, and were more likely to be 'oppressed' and in need of empowerment. These participants also accepted the link between failed integration and radicalisation despite the fact this is not proven. This meant the majority of non-Muslims interviewed broadly supported government interventions promoting the need for better integration of Muslim women into western society in order to tackle radicalisation.

Muslim focus groups however also appeared to accept the unproven link between failed integration and vulnerability to radicalisation. Several Muslim women's focus groups identified first-generation immigrant mothers as requiring specific intervention and empowerment, and suggested their children were more likely to be 'at risk'. Risk was associated with a greater cultural gap between them and their children, language barriers and their failure to understand western societies. One Muslim youth referred to this as a "back home mentality". Ability to speak the national language was regarded as a key component of integration, particularly in Muslim and non-Muslim focus groups in the UK, where the government launched a 2016 scheme to teach "migrant spouses" English, or risk losing their right to

remain in the UK.[47] One Muslim woman in the UK criticised immigrant mothers for failing to learn English, "I think mothers nowadays have to be well informed and know English because they cannot communicate well with their children who have been born or raised here, who go to English schools. If your kid comes home with some idea and you don't know how to deal with it, this is a problem." A German Muslim mother agreed, "if this mother or woman is educated, is integrated, or isn't cut off from wider society, then something like this [radicalisation] just shouldn't be able to happen."

Muslim women frequently perceived CVE to be part of a narrative implying Muslim cultural values harmed women, and Western values did not. This was resisted, as this German participant, a convert mother in her 40s noted:

> *"Obviously you want women to be strong and independent and choose their own path in life, but you have to accept which path they choose. It's not empowering women to want them to give up on being good Muslims...To empower them to be great go-go dancers, that's not right. [laughs] It has to be up to them to choose how they live, so give them the power to do that."*

The issue of the headscarf and veil was an important and sensitive one in the empowerment debate. Women felt a tension between the vision of "empowerment", and their own commitment to their faith, as this female Canadian student explained:

> *"Muslim women are not ok with the white feminist agenda, with the idea that Muslim women who have cloths on their heads can't help themselves; 'we must save them'. No, Muslim women actually want to cover up and no one is forcing us. If you want to take off the hijab, you can take it off, but the narrative is that Muslim women want to be saved. It's 'white saviours' – we want none of that."*

[47] Rowena Mason and Harriet Sherwood, "Migrant Spouses Who Fail English Test May Have to Leave UK, Says Cameron," *The Guardian*, January 18, 2016, sec. UK news, http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2016/jan/18/pm-migrant-spouses-who-fail-english-test-may-have-to-leave-uk.

Male Muslim participants were aware of the debates and government activities around women's empowerment, and the majority were also suspicious. This young Canadian man told us, "Usually, the 'empowerment' I see these days is that women are 'empowered'...in a way that brings them out of their culture. This is abuse by people that are trying to empower them." Such suspicion was associated with a rejection by men of the concept of CVE targeting women.

4.3 Why women, why us? Roles for Government, Roles for Fathers

Significantly, an emphasis on Muslim women as the core actors in counter-radicalisation was also rejected on the grounds that this obscured the role of other, more important agents, such as the government. Focus on mothers was perceived by some as a way of 'letting the government off the hook'. As one young Muslim father in Germany said, "Separating women and men [in CVE] - I don't find it really appropriate. Because it's a problem that affects both sexes and also states need to be involved." Instead, many Muslim participants advocated shared social responsibility, not confined to Muslim communities. This sentiment frequently led to frustration with the research question as formulated, and resistance to it. It was also perceived as permitting the government to deflect attention away from more pressing issues in Muslim communities, such as violence against Muslim women. The vast majority of women had experienced abuse of some form by non-Muslims, but it was most reported in groups in Canada, where research took place in the week after the Paris attacks. Many women were also nervous of lone travel, and men expressed anxiety over the safety of female relatives.

Research also suggested a growing inapplicability of assumptions about traditional gender dynamics in Muslim families. Many Muslim women participants had jobs, as well as having a family. While they recognised their role as primary care-givers, they highlighted the limitations to this. Some female Muslim research participants questioned why mothers should play a different role to men in CVE, and why the onus of responsibility of countering radicalisation should be put on them. As one young Muslim woman in Canada queried, "Why is it only the mother's role to pick

up on these signs? It takes two to parent." The view was echoed widely, by male participants as well as female, and shared by young people, who frequently described close relationships with fathers as well as mothers.

One important neglected actor identified in discussions on CVE was the father. All participants suggested the family played an important role in instilling values in young children. Participants also acknowledged mothers have a different relationship with children than fathers. However, one of the clearest research findings from all countries, but particularly in France and the Netherlands, was that participants desire specific engagement with fathers in CVE programming, in for example, parenting classes. Muslim women described bearing the brunt of child-care in families, and having little time and suggested including fathers could be advantageous to mothers. Parents were more likely than non-parents to challenge any specific role in CVE for mothers alone, reflecting a desire for shared parenting. Some mothers suggested a focus on fathers could also help prevent mothers being blamed if children joined Daesh. Many Muslim and non-Muslim participants, including young people, expressed the view that both parents need to be engaged in CVE, each with their own role.

Men interviewed in all countries also wanted CVE to help them act as positive role models, to engender change. Firstly, they felt this could counteract negative but widespread stereotypical representations of Muslim men as potential 'Jihadis', instead reinforcing positive images of men as carers and role models. Secondly, men emphasised their specific skill-sets. Given the higher incidence of male radicalisation, many Muslim participants felt a role for fathers was particularly desirable, in order to influence sons. Many believed male authority could carry more weight with young men. In some families, women also expected fathers to exercise particular kinds of masculine authority and possess deeper theological knowledge. In the words of one Muslim mother in the UK, "… women are quite weak... Like you [to another female participant] didn't know about ISIS. I think it is more relevant to engage men." Even where this narrative was resisted, and women described equal domestic relationships, many participants emphasised a lack of equality in access to the public realm. They felt that if the primary objective of CVE

was to tackle radicalisation – not female empowerment – the roles of women and mothers may be limited due to lesser mosque attendance, which limited their access to information. This was a strong observation among Muslim men and women in the UK, where women's mosque access can be poor.[48] It was however also referenced in other countries.

4.4 The Mother Paradox

Putting the onus of CVE on women was also perceived to risk securitising the role of mothers. A small number of participants highlighted that mothers would inevitably prioritise the *actual* family dynamic over a *potential* security threat and that for some Muslim participants the risk that reporting children might pose to family stability was a greater threat than radicalisation itself. Men and women suggested reporting your own child would represent a complete breakdown of trust and pointed to parents' moral struggles in this area. Instead, it was felt family stability was needed to stop radicalisation, and engagement aimed at encouraging mothers to report crime could backfire. A Muslim father in Germany explained:

> *"If you're looking at the mother-son relationship, what [CVE] does is take something positive and make it negative…if mothers...go to the police, and say "my son has these tendencies, maybe he'll go to ISIS or something like that," that will just destroy the whole family! Then what they achieve is the opposite of what they want. Because then the son is just going to leave the family, and live somewhere else, where he can't be controlled ...It's actually counter-productive."*

In effect, these participants outlined how the core assumption of engaging women in CVE – that they are the prime care-giver, with an influential relationship with children – was also the reason this strategy was unlikely to work. The same relationship that justified the maternal logic of CVE would also deter mothers from

[48] "Worshipping as Equals: Plans to Build Britain's First Women-Led Mosque," *The Independent*, March 15, 2016, http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/worshipping-as-equals-plans-to-build-britains-first-women-led-mosque-a6933021.html.

going to the police, other officials or support groups, a key aim of many CVE programmes. A parallel conversation and reasoning was evident in non-Muslim, as well as Muslim groups, around lack of trust in the police. All parents, across race and gender, doubted their own ability, should it come to it, to inform on their children.

A more fundamental scepticism about mothers' roles in CVE was often simply based on the perception that however powerful women's influence, all parents lose the ability to impact children after a certain age, when peers and other influences matter more. This was particularly emphasised by those participants with personal experience of radicalisation among family members, such as this Dutch woman, whose brother died in Syria:

> *"Nobody could stop my brother...Nobody could do anything. You could talk with him for hours. And when he saw images from Syria and Iraq on TV everything would start all over again. It was very difficult."*

4. 4 Daesh and the Changing Gender Landscape of CVE

The current security landscape also impacted on perceptions of the relevance of CVE interventions with Muslim women, in two major ways. Firstly the rise of female radicalisation means assumptions about women's 'natural' propensity for peace are challenged; secondly the prevalence of convert recruits casts doubt on the focus on heritage Muslim communities.

Female Radicalisation

The vast majority of participants were aware of the recruitment of young women, mothers and families to Daesh. Several Muslim focus groups included members with personal experience of male and female radicalisation in their communities, and people who had travelled to Syria to join Daesh. This led a minority of participants to challenge the core CVE assumption that women are peaceful

moderates, and will naturally wish to tackle the violence (of men). Across countries, Muslim participants, male and female, asserted that only a tiny minority supported Daesh; yet they also suggested no assumptions should be made that these are always men, or that mothers would either naturally agree with governments, or ally with the state.

The Challenge of Converts

Muslim participants across countries struggled with the knowledge that the term 'extremism' is now most frequently associated with Islamist actors such as Daesh, or Al Qaida. They rejected however the logic which designating Muslim communities as explicitly vulnerable however, pointing to convert radicalisation as a neglected issue. Muslim participants highlighted that the inability of government to widen perceptions of who is 'vulnerable' beyond immigrant populations of Muslim heritage means converts are a blind-spot – though Muslim communities used this primarily as an argument that they should not be the sole focus of counter-radicalisation programmes.

Convert radicalisation has particular gendered implications. Firstly, while convert radicalisation has been a feature of European Jihadi recruitment for some years, Daesh radicalisation has increased its incidence,[49] particularly in women, for example explicitly targeting them in propaganda.[50] In France and Germany this has been associated with radicalisation to Daesh. In Germany, 35% of female recruits are more likely to be converts (versus 18% of men)[51] while in France 25% of all women recruited are converts compared to 20% of men.[52] Secondly, there are implications for families, with non-Muslim mothers of convert recruits left isolated, as Muslim communities receive information via CVE interventions that do not reach

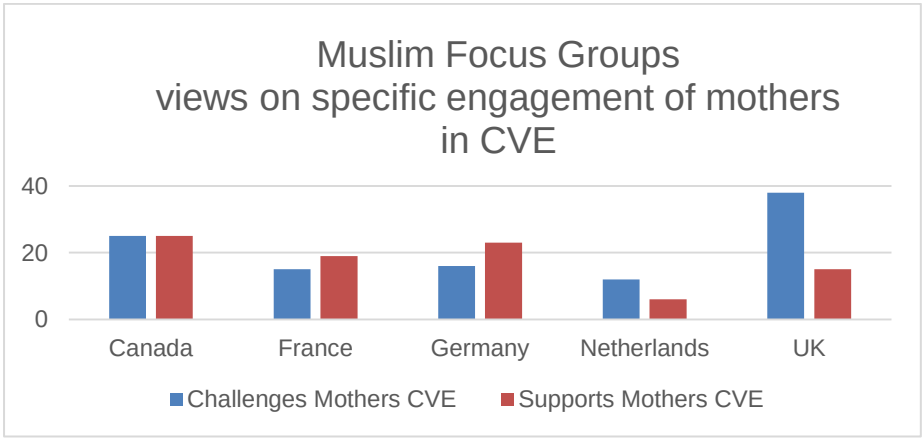
[49] Roy cited in Isaac Chotiner and Jamelle Bouie, "The Islamization of Radicalism," *Slate*, June 22, 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/interrogation/2016/06/olivier_roy_on_isis_brexit_orlando_and_the_islamization_of_radicalism.html; Schuurman, Flower, and Grol, "Converts and Islamist Terrorism:," 15.
[50] Dabiq 15 in July 2016 is aimed at converts
[51] STEINBERG, *German Jihad*.
[52] Khosrokhavar, "Converts, Women, Middle-Class — European Jihadism Expands Its Reach"; Sébastien Pietrasanta, "La déradicalisation, outil de lutte contre le terrorisme," 2015, 10, http://www.ladocumentationfrancaise.fr/var/storage/rapports-publics/154000455.pdf.

them. The research included interviews with the mothers of three converts to Daesh – two German men who were prevented from leaving for Syria, and one young Dutch woman currently there – who emphasised their need for greater support. These families communicated their experiences of neglect by systems focused on immigrant-heritage communities. A German mother, explained:

> *"We are basically the mothers of the first generation. ..there was nothing, no one to talk to, no provision for counselling, nothing. .. I looked for an imam, I couldn't find one. This just isn't a topic you really expected to be confronted with. Drugs sure, [but] converting to Islam [and ISIS] – that's just different – we were alone, an alien."*

5 CVE Fatigue: An Obstacle to Work with Muslim Women

Willingness to engage with the idea of gendered CVE depended on attitudes towards CVE in general. The chart below depicts numbers of positive and negative coded responses per country regarding whether women should specifically be targeted in CVE interventions.



Muslim communities expressed hostility to the logic of CVE interventions targeting them, or women within them. Most believed it was not relevant to them or their families as only a tiny minority have travelled to Daesh from any country. However, scepticism was not solely related to need, but trust in institutions. Of the 27 focus groups conducted among Muslim communities – distinct from interviews with families of those 'radicalised' – fourteen included participants who had experience of radicalisation in their milieu. Groups reported young people leaving for Syria and Iraq; participants personally approached by recruiters; or the targeting of children, or friends. This was of concern to them.

For participants in all countries, scepticism about women's role in CVE appeared part of a broader concern about the entire concept of CVE, existing approaches and prospect of future success. Young Muslims – men and women in their 20s, and teenagers – demonstrated the strongest scepticism, associating CVE with Islamophobia, which clearly has implications for their receptivity to preventive approaches. This group is the so-called "post 9/11" generation, who have only known negative narratives surrounding Muslims and Islam since the 2001 attacks. This is also the group identified as most vulnerable to radicalisation in current theory. Perceptions of Western media exaggeration around Daesh and stigmatisation of Muslims in all countries have also impacted on willingness to engage.

6 Conclusions

This publication has set out some of the key problems with CVE interventions targeting women in Muslim communities, focusing on the surprising number of shared stories from different cities across all five research countries, despite each employing a different approach. It revealed significant challenges to specific CVE focus on Muslim women, and the assumptions that underpin this. While women and men recognise that mothers have an important role in families, and women want support to influence CVE in the public space, there was much suspicion over current interventions.

Firstly, it was clear that women did desire support, and even 'empowerment', but in ways they defined. Women did not discount attempts to stop recruitment to Daesh. Over half of the focus groups conducted with Muslim communities, particularly in the Netherlands but also Germany, France, and Canada, reported radicalisation in their communities, which was of concern. Engagement, however, should not be aimed at imposing western cultural values; limited only to Muslim-heritage communities; and it should also genuinely address related issues such as Islamophobia. Focusing on women as 'mothers only' should be avoided and, instead, women's role as leaders and workers need to be promoted and supported, to ensure that CVE does not have a disempowering effect. Ultimately, women's empowerment was counter-productive if it asked them to prioritise state security over family life, or cast them as oppressed by Islam, or somehow 'responsible' for the radicalisation of their youth.

Secondly, CVE interventions need to target mothers and fathers. There is concern that initiatives focused on mothers only (of which there are examples) perpetuate gender norms though there was some discussion of the different roles men and women play in the family. Instead, targeting both mothers and fathers would better reflect family dynamics and acknowledge the important roles fathers can play in educating and supporting children. Of particular relevance for Muslim communities is the widely accepted fact that men are more likely to attend the local mosque and therefore have access to different sources of information. However, the limitations of all parents needs to be recognised, in a world in which friends, youth culture and social media strongly influence young people, with some calling for more CVE work with peers.

Thirdly, CVE should be directed not to communities of religion, but to communities of need. Young Muslim communities are targeted by Daesh recruiters; but so too are converts. Daesh radicalisation in a western context has changed the CVE landscape. It involves increased numbers of converts, who are disproportionality female. This has particular implications for government interventions, with a need to broaden the understanding of 'vulnerability' to Daesh outside 'Muslim

communities'; and to narrow the focus to those who need help. It also requires reappraisal of suggestions that integration is the key to countering radicalisation. This is particularly important as both Muslim and non-Muslim communities appear to have internalised government narratives regarding the association of integration and radicalisation to some degree, despite the absence of a proven link.[53] Similarly, perceptions of the validity of CVE aimed at 'empowering oppressed Muslim women' also differed between Muslims and non-Muslims. Commitment to this aim as a foundation of CVE programmes with Muslim women is likely to contribute to further tension between communities.

A key perception among Muslim participants is that CVE blanket targets them. This is resented and potentially undermines positive – gendered – CVE work. In countries such as the UK and Netherlands, with a decade long history of national CVE programmes, scepticism among Muslims was high. The tentative conclusion formed was that opposition to the role of women was, in fact, a reflection of resistance to CVE in any form. Further research specifically focused on comparing groups which have received CVE programming with those that haven't is required to provide further validation.

The findings are not straightforward. There are clear tensions in responses, which are frequently contradictory. Narratives of empowerment to western ideals were resisted; and yet some focus group participants suggested it was the 'unintegrated other' within their own community who perhaps constitute the biggest vulnerability. Fathers' engagement was sought, yet even working women suggested mothers had most contact with children. Participants sought to distance themselves from issues of extremism, while also expressing anxiety over them, and describing often personal knowledge of them. Such complex feelings are generated by CVE, by government responses to terror, by society the media and from within communities themselves and require greater understanding. Further research is needed to explore these tensions, which reflect ambivalence regarding

[53] Sadeq Rahimi and Raissa Graumans, "Reconsidering the Relationship Between Integration and Radicalization," *Journal for Deradicalization* 0, no. 5 (December 20, 2015): 28–62.

CVE and resistance to this, even where its aims are acknowledged as potentially beneficial.

CVE interventions are in their infancy. Future programmes should constantly challenge the ‘maternal logic’ of the assumptions contained within them to assess their relevance. Understanding the gender dynamics of countering extremism entails shifting the focus from what the State thinks women can give and do, and instead to women and men’s contributions in reshaping the discourse of the war on terror, and their own futures.